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## PART IV. **INSURGENT SOLIDARITIES**

# “Sex Workers Unite!”: U.S. Sex Worker Support Networks in an Era of Criminalization

Crystal A. Jackson

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**Abstract:** This article analyzes how sex worker support networks exist at a nexus of support, friendship, and assistance for current and former sex workers, stemming from participation at the Desiree Alliance conference in 2010. During the conference, current and former sex workers engaged in peer-to-peer education on a range of issues and continued to support one another after the conference in ways that value both well-being and work. As social nodes of resilience and care in a neoliberal, carceral society, sex worker support networks embody broad meanings of harm reduction and resistance to traditional, institutionalized forms of protection and labor rights. **Keywords:** sex work, support networks, prostitution, activism

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Sex workers supporting each other and organizing together is a relatively new topic of study, seldom situated as historically relevant or insightful, and only occasionally discussed in the histories of activism in the United States (Chateauvert 2014; Ditmore 2010). This article builds on the feminist concept of “female support networks” (Cook 1977, 43) to explore sex workers’ power as radical challenges to labor organizing and the carceral state. I propose that “sex worker support networks” are critical social nodes of resistance and resilience grounded in peer-to-peer skill sharing, valuing the individual and the work, and figuring out how to navigate an ontologically insecure world.

Feminist studies find that emotionality and community are not just important characteristics of activism, but important outcomes—outcomes not traditionally recognized as central to activism and organizing (see Fine

2006; Guenther 2009; or Hardy and Cruz 2019 for diverse examples of emotionality as an activist outcome). How do sex workers in the United States carve out strategies of support despite the lack of labor union support and in direct opposition to the criminalization of sexual labor (including current assumptions that legal sexual labors like erotic dance are suspect hubs of sex trafficking)? In an era of increasing criminalization of prostitution and sex trafficking in the United States (Bernstein 2018), sex worker support networks are a vibrant form of resistance and care.

Since 2006, the Desiree Alliance, a by-and-for-sex-workers organization, has hosted the only U.S. national rights conference for sex workers and their allies every few years. Stemming from participant observation at Desiree Alliance 2010 and postconference interviews, this article focuses on the sex worker support networks which were produced at and continued after the conference. The year 2010 represents a unique moment in time: after a decade of institutionalization of the federal Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000 but before the Act was used to target and shutter online sex worker screening tools and electronically mediated harm-reduction practices (for example, the government raids of sex work websites Rentboy.com and Backpage.com). The domestic uses and consequences of the TVPA on sex workers and sex workers' rights efforts were a hot topic at the 2010 conference.

### **The Whorephobia of Carceral Politics**

In the United States, prostitution (the sale and purchase of sex) and prostitution-related activities (advertising, transporting, etc.) are wholly criminalized.<sup>1</sup> Criminalization is a traditional institutional response to protecting women and girls. But this approach has failed sex workers, not helped them. The physical, sexual, and emotional violence and stigma that people who engage in sexual labor (and people assumed to engage in sexual labor) experience at the hand of the state has been cataloged by scholars (e.g., Bass 2015) and activists alike (Alliance for a Safe & Diverse DC 2008; Ray and Catherine 2014; Torres and Paz 2012; see also Best Practices Policy Project, Desiree Alliance, and Sex Workers Outreach Project-NYC 2014). Individuals who sell sex/ual services are subject to punitive laws that situate them as criminals or victims, necessitating contact from law enforcement or entanglement in the "criminal justice–social service alliance" (Dewey and St. Germain 2016).

Additionally, legal businesses like strip clubs and massage parlors are raided regularly by law enforcement across the country as suspected sex trafficking hubs. Further, adult businesses in neighborhoods of color or businesses with majority Black, Latina, and Asian/Asian American workers are targeted with greater frequency (Ditmore and Thukral 2012). Yet there is little “accountability of governments, traffickers, or communities” when these raids are conducted (2012), and, according to sex workers, often result in arrest, violence, or death.<sup>2</sup>

Institutionalized support structures have not worked well for sex workers, unless grounded in harm-reduction ideology, which is the minority of social service provision in the United States today for sex workers and sex trafficking survivors (Dewey and St. Germain 2016; Musto 2016). Relying partially or wholly on TVPA funding, U.S. anti-trafficking programs often refuse assistance unless the woman agrees to stop selling sex, and in some cases, to stop talking to people from “the life,” the colloquial term that anti-prostitution and anti-sex trafficking activists use to refer to engaging regularly in sexual labor (Oselin 2014). Moreover, when Dewey and St. Germain studied what they term the “alliance” between the criminal justice system and social services that offer rehabilitation in lieu of imprisonment for prostitution charges, they found that “the criminal justice system’s financial and ideological dominance over the alliance and its ethos results in a punitive approach that fails to consider the gendered socioeconomic realities that make sex trading the best viable option” for some women, largely poor women and women of color (2016, 255). The criminal justice system, and the related alternatives to incarceration, have crystallized coalitions under the TVPA that are grounded in protectionist beliefs about what is “best” for women rather than realistic support for poor women.

The U.S.-based TVPA, first passed in 2000, has influenced prostitution and sex trafficking policy and efforts domestically and internationally for almost two decades (Bernstein 2010, 2012, 2018; Chuang 2010; Ditmore 2005; Bromfield and Capous-Desyllas 2012; Limoncelli 2009; Weitzer 2007, 2011). The TVPA was written to “protect, prosecute, and prevent” trafficking, which is framed as synonymous with “modern slavery” (Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons n.d.). But instead of helping survivors and victims of trafficking, scholars and activists alike have critiqued the TVPA for overly focusing on sex trafficking (the smallest group of trafficking victims), for criminalizing the choices of poor

women of color, and for acting as an anti-immigrant regulation (Agustín 2007; Doezeema 2010). To wit, trafficking raids are overwhelmingly sex trafficking raids, and tend to result in prostitution-related arrests and charges, rather than assisting trafficking victims, domestically and globally (Agustín 2007; Ditmore and Thukral 2012). In a sense, sexual labor and sex trafficking are conflated as a universal experience of violence.

The conflation of sexual labor and sex trafficking obscures the realities of sex trafficking victims/survivors and sexual laborers. Scholars have argued that this is not an accident. Rather, this is a continuation of the "feminist sex wars" that situates all sexualized commerce and sex work as a form of violence against women and girls. Beyond the local anti-porn and anti-prostitution politicking of the late twentieth century, today's carceral feminists situate the nation-state as the guarantor of gender equity and freedom from violence for women and girls, and enact a neoliberal reliance on the criminal justice system as arbiter of protection (Bernstein 2018). Subsequently, an extreme criminalization of prostitution and related activities has emerged in the United States (Bernstein 2018; Jackson, Reed, and Brents 2017). Relying on a carceral approach to sexual labor shifts the conversation about social problems away from poverty and economic inequalities, structural transphobia and homophobia, and the racist and classist U.S. criminal justice system (including alternatives to incarceration), thus manifesting an increasingly complex system of social control and punishment for poor women who sell sex or are suspected of selling sex (Dewey and St. Germain 2016; Oselin 2014).

## Organizing

Sex workers' rights activists in the United States have made successful coalitions with numerous organizations on local levels, including local National Organization for Women chapters (Gilmore 2010). But large-scale inclusion in sizable unions or support from national, mainstream feminist organizations has not been achieved.<sup>3</sup> "Nontraditional workers" like sex workers or undocumented immigrants (and undocumented sex workers) are not traditional worker rights fodder (Gall 2006; Fine 2006). Yet issues with the occupation and industry, such as unsafe working conditions, violence, or arrest, are often primary mobilizing grievances for contingent and criminalized workers. Thus alternative forms of worker organizing are necessary for criminalized workers like undocumented immigrants

because they “have always been underrepresented within the ranks of organized labor” (Fine 2006, 245).

Alternative nodes of worker organizing result in alternative types of support and alternative means of building membership. As social movement scholars point out, political consciousness and identity evolve over time (Barker and Lavalette 2002), and it is community that often keeps someone connected to an organization or effort. In her study of “emotional cultures of feminist organizations,” Katja Guenther found that, different from “state-dependent organization[s],” an “autonomous organization encourages displays of feelings as part of consciousness raising, creating an emotion culture that reduces public appeal but produces especially loyal and active constituents” (2009, 337). Further, peer-to-peer support has been found to be uniquely suited to, and needed for, worker organizing within stigmatized and criminalized communities such as undocumented day laborers (Fine 2006). Peer-led workshops, know-your-rights trainings, and art as activism are some nontraditional types of worker organizing that lend well to identity building and emotive response.

Feminist historian Blanche Wiesen Cook first studied “female support networks” as a structural element of politically active women in the late 1800s and early 1900s, arguing that there is something viable and important beyond these women’s “political contributions” (1977, 43). Cook argues that “networks of love and support are crucial to our ability as women to work in a hostile world where we are not in fact expected to survive” (44). There is a structural element here beyond pop-cultural ideals of sisterhood. Cook’s theorizing of solidarity-driven connection helps us understand how and why activist success can be (and could be) measured in nontraditional ways—beyond, for example, changes to law.

A study of sex worker advocacy participation in the United States found that activist involvement produces identity building, which resists and challenges the master status of “victim-criminals” put upon sex workers (Majic 2014, 463). Indeed, Melissa Gira Grant (2014), journalist, author, and longtime sex workers’ rights proponent, noted in her book *Play the Whore: The Work of Sex Work* that sex workers have a history of sharing skills and building connections with people new to sex work. Since the 1960s, U.S. sex workers’ rights organizers have provided support for sex workers while also advocating for changes in society to destigmatize and decriminalize sexual labors (Chateauvert 2014; Gilmore 2010), and doing so as part of a global sex workers’ rights movement (Mac and Smith

2018; Mgbako 2016). Globally and locally, the emotions of organizing are important (Hardy and Cruz 2018). Further, while the rise of affordable and accessible technology and internet at the time of the TVPA led to a flashpoint of sex worker organizing that is still in play today, scholars have noted that changes in technology are met with suspicion by anti-sex trafficking advocates who are concerned about new avenues of sex trafficking, vulnerability, and exploitation (Musto 2016).

## Methods

Drawing on participant observation at the Desiree Alliance 2010 national sex workers' rights conference and seventeen semistructured interviews with attendees over the following eighteen months, this article explores how sex worker support networks exist at a nexus of support, friendship, and assistance for current and former sex workers. The Desiree Alliance is a sex workers' rights organization whose primary task is hosting a multiday national gathering of current and former sex workers, as well as sex workers' rights advocates and allies. The gatherings have taken place in 2006, 2007, 2008, 2010, 2012, and 2016. It is a coalition of other national and local sex workers' rights organizations, a place to bring everyone together. Organizational goals focus as much on worker development and support *within* the community, as they do on external or collective actions *for* the community. Per the Desiree Alliance website:

The most important goal of the Desiree Alliance is to be part of efforts to reinvigorate the sex workers' rights movement in the U.S. Therefore, all of our actions in the last years focused on building leadership and constructive activism in the sex worker population. While the Desiree Alliance promotes rights and justice for people engaging in sexual commerce, we collaborate and stand with organizations working in overlapping struggles for the rights of sexual and gender minorities, sexual rights in general, reproductive rights and human rights. (n.d.)

The need to "reinvigorate" has been spurred by increasing online surveillance and subsequent raids or setups, as a result of the technological advances since the early 2000s and in response to the strength of carceral feminist efforts and the institutionalization of the TVPA. Indeed, as I have concluded elsewhere, "the U.S. anti-sex trafficking movement has galvanized and mobilized sex worker rights organizers as sex workers feel the



impact of anti-prostitution policies enacted to end trafficking” (Jackson 2016, 40). Mainstream anti-sex trafficking efforts have forced sex workers’ rights activists to frame their efforts in response to new contexts of criminalization and policing.

With hindsight, I can say I have been a sex workers’ rights activist since around 2005. At the time, I was a graduate student; a white, cisgender, queer woman engaging in sex-positive sex activism. I was introduced to a local woman, Genesis, who, along with another organizer, wanted to create a national conference in the United States for sex workers and their allies to come together—what would become the Desiree Alliance. Genesis had approached my mentor, a professor at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, to talk about allying over the conference. I interned with the Desiree Alliance and volunteered at the 2006 conference. I continued to be involved with local sex workers’ rights efforts off and on over the next few years. Then, in 2010, I asked Genesis if I could attend the conference as a researcher to collect data, and she agreed. I was noted as a researcher on my badge; I left a flyer at the sign-in table letting folks know I was looking to do interviews with attendees. It soon became clear that there was no time to conduct interviews during the conference as people went from workshop to workshop, or grabbed coffee with a new or old friend. Some people agreed to be interviewed at a later date, most by phone, a couple in person. All the interviews were recorded with permission, and then transcribed; pseudonyms were used.

While the Desiree Alliance conference was quite diverse in terms of race and ethnicity, age, and sexual identity, the conference leaders were concerned that the most marginalized group of sex workers—street-based workers—were not well represented. It is important to note that street-based sex work is, likely, the smallest group of sexual laborers today—with the internet, there is less need to be street based (though this is changing, due to online policing and federal intervention) (Weitzer 2007, 2011). That, combined with racialization of class privilege (of having regular email access and a consistent phone number), and people’s response to my own intersectional identities, skewed the interviewee data to majority white (fourteen of the seventeen participants). One identified as black, one as Latina, and one as multiracial Latina and white.

The majority of interviewees were cisgender (two cis men and thirteen cis women), with two identifying as trans women. The majority also identified as gay, queer, or bisexual, which makes sense given the historic

intersections of sex workers' rights activism and LGBTQ+ activism (Chateauvert 2014), and given the impacts of homophobia and transphobia on a person's socioeconomic status. Indeed, many interviewees also had experience with organizing around LGBTQ+ rights, reproductive justice, and/or racial justice/antiracism activism. The age range was wide considering the stereotypes of sex workers as young: ages ranged from midtwenties to early fifties, with five participants in their thirties and eight participants in their forties. They lived across the United States and similar themes emerged across geography. Although the Desiree Alliance is national, interviewees spoke of local knowledge as useful and important to well-being.

While coding interview transcripts and field notes using grounded theory, I found that sex workers' narratives underscore the centrality of connection and coming together. Interviewees shared that participating in the conference impacted them long after the conference was over. Many reported friendship, business support, and opportunities for art and activism as continued experiences and connections postconference. What follows is analysis of how the conference itself and the attendees created sex worker support networks that valued labor, safety, and health through friendships, connections, and peer-to-peer trainings. Below, I show how peer socializing forms social nodes that a) fight stigma, b) set the framework for support network building, and c) affirm value in two categories: business and camaraderie intertwined, and emphasizing *value*, including the value of the person's safety and health, and the monetary value of the work itself.

### **Business and Camaraderie Intertwined: Fighting Stigma, Finding Friendship**

The 2010 conference, themed Working Sex: Power, Practice, and Politics, consisted of ninety-nine panels, workshops, and talks over six days in July. The conference itself is a key component of community building centering peer-to-peer support. Workshops and panels addressed a range of issues that aim to increase sex workers' safety, enhance solidarity, reinforce safer-sex norms, encourage harm-reduction practices, and connect sex workers to (or teach sex workers how to find) less stigmatizing social services, legal aid, or a local sex workers' rights organization. Business development panels, which were led by and for sex workers (current or former), addressed a diverse range of business-related issues, with titles like, "A Taste of Leather: Incorporating Kink into Your Work," "Keeping Out of

Harm's Way: Sex Work and the Law," "Energetic Protection and Cleansing for Sex Workers," and "Developing a Screening Policy That Works for You, Keeping You Safe, and Ensuring Your Success!"

In interviewing conference attendees after the conference—some a month or two later, most about five to eight months after the fact—I was able to gain insights into the impacts of conference attendance. Astrid, a bisexual white cisgender woman in her early forties, shared that it was common for attendees, through bonding at the conference and afterward, to share contact information for local businesses that are sex worker friendly, which is important to her and her work as an escort. In our interview a few months after the conference, Astrid explained she was "more comfortable dealing with someone in their business if I know that they're sex worker friendly." Sex workers seek out nonjudgmental (or, less ideally, less judgmental) resources from an "accountant or chiropractor [to an] OB-GYN." Sex workers contend with fears of arrest or police harassment in both legal and criminalized labors, and fears of being outed as a sex worker against their wishes, even by a professional who is bound by certain ethics. Finding sex worker friendly resources and businesses is a relief, from a hairdresser one could chat with to a mental-health professional who does not obsess over sex work or push them to stop working. For Astrid and many others, sharing advice like this is not just about business, it is a form of activism that supports an individual holistically.

Catherine's interview took place almost a year after the conference. Catherine, a longtime sex workers' rights activist and a cisgender woman in her forties who identified as half-white, half-Latina, surmised that "your activism might not even be traditional activism. It might be just giving someone a great idea online about how to screen somebody, or how to improve your website. That's activism too." In the "shadow economy" that is sexual labor, whether working as an independent contractor in a strip club, or advertising professional domination services online, or selling sex, networking and self-made business connections are necessary to replace the skill building, support, and general safety mechanisms that a company or manager would supply an employee.

Jana, a white cisgender woman in her twenties who worked both in strip clubs and as an escort, shared that she had gotten business support, client referrals, and learned new skills through her involvement with the Desiree Alliance and a local chapter of the Sex Workers Outreach Project (SWOP).<sup>4</sup> In an interview during the fall following the DA conference, she

explained that "as a stripper, it's nice to have friends in that industry that I can hang out with. In terms of out-call or in-call, it's nice to have people know some of the customers and can attest to their personality or [tell] you about certain things." Whether it is about a client who takes "forever" to orgasm or advice on menstruating while sex working, sex worker support networks provide both practical advice and affirmation.

Making "lifelong friends," as one interviewee exclaimed, was what many current and former sex workers liked most about being an activist in the sex workers' rights movement. For example, while working at a West Coast sex workers' rights organization, Shawn started a support group for male sex workers that lasted from 1999 until he left the organization in the mid-2000s. Shawn noted gender differences in coming together, and acknowledged:

I just felt like men were so, so far behind women in just basic organizing. I, to this day, if you went on a male sex worker website in a major city like New York or San Francisco, you could find men who don't know another sex worker, [men who] don't have friends who are sex workers. Like, the level of isolation is astounding. So we would have these very kind of sweet support group meetings.

Connection took on political meaning as (criminalized) sex workers came together. I often heard a sense of excited relief about finding similarly situated people. Jana, quoted earlier, remarked, "The people that I've met has been the most rewarding part of being an activist. It's really empowering to be around really passionate people, who want to reshape the world for the better." Catherine, who traveled the world as an erotic dancer, made some of her best friends through her involvement in sex workers' rights activism, said excitedly, "Some of my best friends! All of his aunties! [*motioning to her baby*] He's a product of the sex workers' movement! [*laughs*] Yeah, yeah . . . people I will always know and work with."

Friendships help ease the impact of stigma, in addition to providing practical business support and help. For example, Astrid lives in a mid-western state and often travels for work as an escort. In our interview several months after DA 2010 in July, she shared that she is happy to "have friends everywhere! Everywhere in the country, every state, I've got a friend now. . . it doesn't matter if I stay in sex work or if I'm even an activist, I know I'm still going to have those friends forever." More than that,

being able to offer a home to traveling sex workers, rather than a stay at hotel or motel, is another outcome of connecting sex workers together. Astrid went on: “It’s just nice to be in a house. You can cook your own meals, it’s comfortable, and you have, you know, that kind of bond.” These bonds have formed over years. Astrid first attended the Desiree Alliance conference in 2006, but “didn’t really meet a lot of people from the core organizational group at that time.” She went on to say that she met DA organizers at other sex workers’ rights events over the next couple of years, and was inspired to found a SWOP chapter in her home town, and eventually, attend DA again in 2010. This is evidence of how a sex worker support network builds via friendly connections.

In an interview in August, the month after the conference, Kennedy, a white, queer cisgender woman, former erotic dancer, and current artist in her midforties, also excitedly shared how she has found support, friendship, and caring in coming together as a community of sex workers and allies. As an artist, she felt that her work had benefited from her involvement with the Desiree Alliance, in addition to making new connections: “I have a whole bunch of new hooker friends!”

In this way, the sex workers’ rights conference acts as a catalyst for different kinds of support around both business and friendship (or at least, friendliness). On one hand, for contingent, stigmatized workers, this is “workplace” organizing. This is also important for safety. Sex workers warn each other about problematic and violent clients, both informally through emails and texts to each other, and also formally through “bad client lists” published online by a local organization or an individual in a particular area. On the other hand, the Desiree Alliance does not have a formal membership process beyond the board and the director. Local chapters of SWOP or other local sex workers’ rights organizations fill that role. Personal connections from the conference are what build much of the support networks, not formal committees or coordinated multistate political efforts. Interviewees were clear in labeling these microlevel forms of support as “activism.”

### **Valuing the Individual: Their Health, Their Safety, and Their Moneymaking**

Attending the Desiree Alliance conference becomes a signifier of safety and trust. Establishing connections and friendships, and exchanging advice and tips about work, in effect, values the work, health, and safety

of each person. Peer-to-peer workshops and trainings at the conference ensure sex workers are comfortable with being there and trust the information being shared, as spaces for workers to address their needs on the job. Training each other and sharing information for safer, more lucrative work, holding know-your-rights trainings for police encounters, sharing ways to work with different clients (e.g., clients suffering from emotional or sexual trauma), and discussing experiences like coming out to family or balancing sex work and parenting were common throughout the six-day conference. These are classic characteristics of alternative modes of worker organizing: peer-to-peer education, broadening meanings of worker safety and support, discussing safety as avoiding the criminal justice system, and, frankly, ensuring they get paid. Further, coming together provides sex workers the space and time to value the individual not only as a person but also as a person who needs money to survive in a capitalist society.

For example, conference leaders conceptualized "harm reduction" in broad and holistic parameters. Harm-reduction approaches identify and work around barriers to safety, health, and well-being for marginalized communities like sex workers, drug users, or homeless youth by, for example, providing needle exchange or condoms to help people stay free of diseases or infections. This is in contrast to only offering services and support if the person stops working or stops using drugs. At the conference, there were traditional harm-reduction workshops that promoted sensible policies and realistic practices for sex workers, encouraged peer education, and offered venue-specific safety tips and advice on how to find and access nonjudgmental health care.

Yet, different from traditional worker rights conferences, attendees were provided information about local Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous meetings, and directions to the closest methadone clinic. Further, many other activities and workshops were labeled as harm reduction, like spiritual development and parenting advice. Yoga was offered at the start and end of each conference day, led by and for sex workers, with no allies allowed. This broadening of what counts as harm reduction values the worker. Valuing the person's sense of self, wellness, and individual needs without demanding someone quit sex work if they want to be safe and happy is quite a juxtaposition from anti-sex trafficking programs that often refuse aid if someone continues with, or returns to, "the life" of sex work.

Given the criminal justice–social service alliance (Dewey and St. Germain 2016), harm reduction also means addressing the impact of criminalization on sex workers' lives. The Desiree Alliance conference had several know-your-rights trainings and best practices for interactions with law enforcement. (Local sex workers' rights organizations sometimes offer similar workshops.) Sex workers learned about how their labor is situated within the law, how to engage police, and, in a more holistic approach to valuing safety, how to articulate the impact of policing on their lives. Allies led some of the workshops, like a "Common Myths about Police Encounters" workshop led by someone from the ACLU of Southern Nevada. This latter workshop is a good example of strategically calling on allies for help; here, having the ACLU present correct and up-to-date information.

Most safety workshops were sex worker led. For example, Streetwise & Safe (SAS), an LGBTQ youth-of-color organization based in New York City, screened a short video made "by and for LGBTQ youth of color who have experienced quality of life policing and policing of sex work." Sex workers of color and queer sex workers are subject to heavier policing efforts, and often report police harassment, violence, and arrest as top issues of concern, along with more punitive outcomes in courtrooms.<sup>5</sup> Afterward, SAS representatives distributed specialized know-your-rights information to attendees, talked more about racism, homophobia, and violence in police interactions, and discussed, according to the conference program, "possibilities for nationally coordinated locally-based advocacy around policing policies and practices which adversely impact queer youth in the sex trades."

In addition to know-your-rights and safety workshops, there were also business-development workshops. Most, as with other workshops, were by and for sex workers. These workshops included "A Tax Workshop for the Cash-Based Professional," "How Much an Hour?," and "Clicking with Your Photographer: Journalizing Your Portfolio and Knowing Your Rights." Business-development workshops also addressed how to deal with burnout, how to advertise online, and how to maintain personal privacy and boundaries with clients. Another lawyer with the ACLU of Southern Nevada led a workshop on "contracts and what to look for," one of few business workshops that was not sex worker led.

Business advice at the gathering is somewhat outside the neoliberal model of profit increase, because increasing value and making more money is a social justice issue for sex workers. Workshops taught sex



workers how to ask for payment, how to negotiate with a client, and how to build or strengthen screening efforts in person and/or online. In short, learning how to identify "the value of sex work"—another business-development workshop title—is key to worker empowerment. Valuing money is important. I asked Kennedy what the Desiree Alliance conference provides to attendees. In rapid-fire succession, she offered rhetorical questions that explain what she and ostensibly others at the conference think about:

How am I going to be a better hooker? How am I gonna make money at this shit? And there's nothing wrong with a heavy dose of capitalism because money is power. . . . And, I think that networking for hookers—fuck yeah! And, "How I do my job?" That's awesome! And also, issues of safety. Also, issues of humanity. And how do we care for each other?

Here, money, support, and well-being intersect. Imbued with a sense of support and care, Kennedy underscored how "networking for hookers" can be empowering exactly because the conference provides a space to talk about work, self-care, relationships, and more. A large part of worker empowerment here comes in the form of peer-to-peer support and the outgrowth of sex worker support networks. Valuing labor and valuing the person as a smart, agentic, complicated individual destroys the criminal-victim master status (Majic 2014). This negates shame and the idea of "dirty work."

Value has multiple meanings here. The simple action of "I see you" validates a person's existence. Peer-to-peer support engenders a sense of togetherness and affinity. It affirms identity, fights isolation and alienation, names oppressive laws and policies, and proffers relief through sharing micro- and macroaggressions of everyday life with empathetic ears. Peer-to-peer support can be in the form of know-your-rights workshops, outlets for artistic expression, activist development, and workshops on autonomy, skills, and self-sufficiency. Valuing the person challenges the stigma and stereotypes that sex workers encounter. This is why social support nodes are central to alternative modes of worker organizing.

Further, explicitly valuing labor means exposing the intersection of gender, class, and sex itself in capitalist society—an action that makes many anti-prostitution advocates point to both sex workers' oppression and their false consciousness. But being able to see oneself as an actor



and in control of one's life, and not as a passive victim, is a powerful outcome of sex worker support networks. Talking to each other about earning money to survive and live validates each other's decision-making abilities. Considering the social ostracization that people who engage in sex work experience, situating a sex worker as valuable, as important, as a decision maker, stands in stark contrast to the "prostitute" criminal/victim tropes recycled again and again in politics and media.

### **Going Forward Together?**

"Sex Workers Unite!" is a popular sex workers' rights slogan at activist events. This is not to say all sex workers are friends or even friendly with each other; similarly, this article is not meant to portray a rosy picture of easy solidarity. Disagreements on big issues, like political strategies, were (and are) common, and who-dislikes-who rumors and realities abound at the conference. Demands to center sex workers of color pushed the Desiree Alliance to purposefully think through inclusion, reflective of pushes in many social justice circles over the last fifteen years. What that slogan is conveying, however, is that sex workers, current or former, can form fierce connections to survive the criminalization and stigmatization of a whorephobic society.

Social support nodes are central to "nontraditional" workers' survival and well-being, as scholars and activists for undocumented immigrant workers' rights have shown. This survival relies heavily on avoiding the criminal justice system. For sex workers, the criminal justice system is a potential source of violence, arrest, incarceration, and loss of family, not a source of protection. Sex worker support networks go beyond normative ideals of harm reduction and idolization of state protection, and create practical, pragmatic, and personal forms of support for economic stability, physical health, mental health, and more. This is very different from the "3 Ps" of the TVPA: prosecution, protection, and prevention.

Mainstream efforts to discourage or forbid sex work actually devalue and chastise people's monetary and survival decisions. "Outlaw poverty, not prostitutes" is a sex workers' rights slogan that encapsulates the different ideological approaches to addressing the sale of sex as a social problem. It is striking that the Desiree Alliance and other sex workers' rights organizations endure in the face of anti-prostitution public opinion, and in opposition to prostitution abolitionists who want to eradicate the sale of

sex and sexualized services altogether, and who want to "save" or "rescue" people without listening to what it is they need.

The 2010 conference was a unique site where attendees connected to each other by valuing each other's safety and health, and individuals' decisions to work or not. By going beyond traditional organizational outreach efforts to get women "off the pole" or "off the streets" (stereotypical vernacular about strip clubs and street-based sex work), the conference strengthened sex worker support networks at local and national levels.

Almost ten years on from the 2010 conference, sex workers' online harm-reduction strategies and electronically mediated support networks have been chipped away at by anti-sex trafficking efforts encoded into law. Desiree Alliance's social media and website announced in summer 2018 that they were canceling the upcoming 2019 conference, themed *Transcending Borders: Immigration, Migration, and Sex Work*, out of concern that the federal Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA) may be applied to conference organizing efforts. The fear, partially, was that internet-mediated communication and messaging about the conference, such as conference travel and scholarships for sex workers, could be construed as trafficking and put the attendees and organizers at risk.

Their fears are not unfounded. The 2018 passing of FOSTA and the continued reauthorizations of the TVPA have laid the groundwork for federal raids on sex worker advertising websites Rentboy.com and Backpage.com (in 2015 and 2018 respectively), Craigslist's shuttering of adult ads in 2010, and, in response to FOSTA in 2018, their dating ads. Sex workers are losing critical arenas (some of which were free) to find and screen clients, and in some cases, to build community. External governmental and advocacy forces, shored up by carceral feminism, are impacting the longevity of, and ability to, come together.

Sex workers and sex workers' rights organizations continue to tell politicians, community leaders, academics, and activists that what they need is harm-reduction support, not rescue; that they need labor rights and decriminalization, not criminalization, harassment, and violence (Bass 2015). It is clear that sex worker support networks are vital social nodes of support that value sex workers' work, well-being, and sense of self. As social nodes of resilience and care in a neoliberal, carceral society, sex worker support networks embody resistance to traditional, institutionalized forms of protection and labor rights. This is what worker organizing looks like in the twenty-first century.

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## Notes

1. Nevada's legal brothels are allowed only in rural counties; this legalization model does not adhere to federal anti-prostitution legislation but is allowed within state and county regulations.
2. For example, in 2017, a woman immigrant from China jumped out of the fourth floor of a raided massage parlor in Queens, New York, to avoid arrest, and died; see Gira Grant and Whitford 2017.
3. However, sex workers in other countries have had more success with traditional union labor organizing (Gall 2006).
4. SWOP local chapters and SWOP national were partner members of the Desiree Alliance.
5. See sex worker community-based research projects cited earlier in this article for more information: Streetwise and Safe in NYC, Red Umbrella Project NYC, Sex Workers Outreach Project USA, along with others not named in reference with the interviewees to protect identities, organizations like local SWOP chapters and the St. James Infirmary in San Francisco.

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